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Spades To Souffles

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BEHIND the Reagan administration's opening to what it hoped would prove newly moderate elements in Iran lay the same old — dare one say it? — liberal optimism that brought down the Carter administration. President Reagan's people believe that inside the Iranian revolution there are rea-

By William Pfaff

sonable and progressive men struggling to get out, prepared to make the United States their ally.

The White House insists it has not been trading arms to Iran for hostages but exploring the diplomatic and political possibilities of what will happen when the Ayatollah Khomeini dies. They say they have made contact with elements in Iran — mainly military, it seems — who might influence that country toward a more moderate future course. If these presidential negotiations, and the arms supplied Iran mainly by Israel at American request, could also free hostages, so much the better.

President Reagan has insisted to Congress that nothing has changed in his policy. Nothing was done that contradicted the country's declared position on arms sales to Iran or hostage negotiations. He no doubt even believes this.

The ultimate aim is Iran's "return to modernism and civilized international relations," as William Colby says, a former head of the CIA and critic of the form, although not the objective, of what Mr. Reagan has been doing.

Mr. Reagan, Robert McFarlane, national security adviser John M. Poindexter and Mr. Colby are all reasonable men who believe that out there in the Near East other reasonable men are irresistibly attracted to "modernism and civilized international relations." They do not acknowledge that the Iranian revolution is driven by the rejection of exactly that modernism — and that

it is a profound movement, encompassing elites as well as the masses.

Mr. McFarlane's mission — whose failure, a White House official is said to have told Congress, followed from "a miscalculation on whom it [the White House] could trust in Iran" — was one more case of the amateurism, historical ignorance and political irresponsibility which increasingly has marked American foreign policy during the later 1970s and the 1980s, under both liberal and conservative presidencies.

There has been a failure of the contemporary American political class to remain at grips with realities outside the United States. Skillful as the men and women now in Washington are in domestic political operations and image-making, their attempt to turn such skills to external affairs repeatedly has collided with forces beyond the ability of the United States to control or the manipulation of images to effect.

The result in policy has too often been demagoguery, the demagoguery of proclaiming one politically profitable line of action while practicing another. At worst it has been failure.

Mr. Reagan's overall foreign policy record is one of failure. What has distinguished Mr. Reagan's presidency has been his extraordinary ability to present failure as success. More striking yet has been the public willingness to accept the retreat from Lebanon, the Grenada operation, the undeclared war in Central America, the Libya raid and the abandonment of serious negotiation on arms limits and political relations with the U.S.S.R. in favor of the woolly idealism of SDI as successes.

In recent years, foreign policy passed from the hands of the post-war policy generation, and their successors in the Kennedy and Nixon administrations, into those of businessmen or lawyers without particular international interests or links, who become temporary government officials. Policy has increasingly been influenced by the political marketing men who have come to dominate presidential elections.

Military men initially called to the National Security Council as staff officers have more and more taken over policy-making positions, for lack of others equipped to do it. For most of this group, world affairs are painted in primary colors. The military men's education inclines them to look upon historical and political generalization, and other non-quantified forms of argument, as unrelia-

ble "theology." They look for material and military solutions to problems. They are engineers of foreign policy. They take spades to souffles.

It is conventional in the Eastern Bloc and Third World countries, and even in Western Europe, to look for Machiavellianism in American foreign policy. But this is one thing that has always been lacking. From the liberal idealism of the Wilson and Roosevelt years to the conservative idealism and messianism of the Reagan presidency, the United States has proven no practitioner of *Realpolitik*.

President Reagan might do well to listen to some of Machiavelli's counsels, for example that "a man who wishes to make a profession of goodness in everything must necessarily come to grief among so many who are not good." Before authorizing Mr. McFarlane's adventures in Iran, he might profitably have reflected that "a wise prince must rely on what is in his power and not on what is in the power of others."

The United States lacks a philosophy of foreign policy, but also, today, an elite capable of developing such a philosophy for the country as it approaches the 1990s. It is not a partisan problem. The level of policy criticism heard from the current Democratic presidential contenders inspires no confidence. It is a problem of political culture, that of a people whose deepest interests and deepest aspirations are at home, not abroad.